Sundays at the barracks

By Pedro Vera

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs-NonCommercial License. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd-nc/1.0/ or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.

One of the basic things that shock most US Army recruits is that every minute of the day is planned in advance and there is no tolerance from straying off the schedule. You have so many minutes to shower, shave, get into uniform, do your bed, clean the bathrooms and your room, etc. You have maybe five minutes to move from station "A" to station "B," etc.

Even more shocking is when the first Saturday arrives and they still have to wake up at 4:30 in the morning and everything is just the same as the previous five days. Keep in mind the grand majority of these recruits are fresh out of high school and not used to this level of activity.

Sundays are different. Even if with these politically correct times put the Army in a position of having to accommodate all religions, the Army itself is basically Christian. And even low-life pond scum like basic trainees in their first phase are entitled to a little contact with God.

Because of this, plus the basic general order that the trainee should give his heart to Jesus, because his ass belongs to the Army, the Army is willing to give a tiny little bit of leeway on Sundays. The cadre gets to wind down a little bit and the troops are encouraged to attend religious services.

The first thing the trainees notice that something is wrong is when they are not awakened at 4:30 AM on that first Sunday. At 4:40 AM everybody is awake, scared in bed not knowing what to do. At 4:45 AM the platoon guides start kicking everybody out of bed to get ready because they smell a setup by the drill sergeants.

By 6:00 AM everything is sparkling clean, and everybody is in uniform. The problem is, there is no drill sergeant in sight.

Around 6:15 AM or so the drill sergeants walk in just to find everybody at the edge of their nerves because they just know there is something going on.

The platoon drill sergeant grabs the first squad leader he spots (all the recruits are pretty much identical. The platoon guides have a cloth piece with embroidered chevrons, two chevrons for a squad leader, and three chevrons for a platoon guide).

"Private Washington?"

"YES DRILL SERGEANT!" Poor Washington has no choice but to holler, even if he is about to fall prey to laryngitis.

"Son, at what time did you lazy sacks of shit get out your bunks? This place looks filthy!"

The place was spotless. The platoon already knew what would happen if any drill sergeant ever found anything not up to their very high standards.

"DRILL SERGEANT, NOBODY WOKE US UP SO WE GOT EVERYBODY UP AT ZERO FIVE HUNDRED DRILL SERGEANT!"

"Washington, did you read the training schedule?"

"DRILL SERGEANT?" Oops, Washington fell for the trick.

"WHO THE HELL TOLD YOU THAT YOU COULD ASK ME A GODDAMN THING? I ASK, YOU ANSWER. UNDERSTOOD? You owe me twenty."

And so it starts. Washington is already doing his first 20 push-ups of the day, and it's not even 6:30 AM.

"LISTEN UP AND LISTEN GOOD. THE REASON WE POST THE TRAINING SCHEDULE IS FOR YOU DUMBASSES TO READ IT. I WAS LED TO BELIEVE READING WAS A REQUIRED SKILL FOR ENLISTMENT IN THE US ARMY. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

Sixty voices went "YES DRILL SERGEANT!"

"Washington, I can't hear you counting. Start from twenty again."

Busted.

"YES DRILL SERGEANT! TWENTY … NINETEEN …"

"Ok, back to the schedule. Like I said before mister Washington here decided to take a break, the training schedule is there for you to read it, not as an ornament. Had any of you read the schedule you would have known first formation for Sundays is at 0620 hours. No PT[1], uniform is BDU[2]s and sneakers. At 0630 hours we march to the chow hall."

59 voices went "YES DRILL SERGEANT." Washington kept on counting.

---

[1] Physical Fitness Training

[2] Battle Dress Uniform, the basic field uniform. The US Marine Corps calls it "Utilities."

The drill sergeant looked down at Washington, grinned and continued:

“At the chow hall there will be a gentleman. A war veteran trying to make ends meet by selling the Sunday newspaper. As you all know, you are not allowed any reading material unless issued. This is the one exception: you are allowed to purchase one copy of the Columbia Times Sunday edition for $1.25. Since the Army is paying everyone so well and you have nothing better to spend your money on, I expect every one of you to not only buy that paper, but to walk away before our friend the vet tries to give you your change. Is that understood?”

“YES DRILL SERGEANT.”

“By the way, this is not mandatory.”

The look on his face made it clear that he would be extremely disappointed if everyone did not walk out of the chow hall with a newspaper. Of course a few idiots would miss the point, but they would learn quick.

We were marched to the chow hall, and after done I thought screw this, Fisher is right, two bucks is nothing since they don’t let us spend our money on anything except toiletries.

I bought the paper.

Once we were marched back to the barracks (at route step[3], since we were wearing sneakers) we were told to split into two groups: one group for the people that bought newspapers, the other group for the rest.

We were told to get the hell out of the sidewalk and run upstairs and read our papers. The rest spent the next 15 minutes doing all sorts of calisthenics, then the idiots that did not volunteer to go to church were sent to cut the grass and paint rocks.

We thought that was funny, so we just leafed thru the paper and joked around a bit. Some of the poorer recruits went around and collected the shopping coupon supplements from those that were about to throw them away. These would be mailed home to their wives and mothers.

After maybe 45 minutes, we were all done, so we just sat there and talked. Minutes later Fisher walked in and kicked us all out of the barracks. Since we were done with the newspaper we could go outside and help the others to cut the grass.

We were marched back for lunch and dinner, then spent the evening getting our uniforms ready for Monday morning.

---

[3] When the "route step march" command is given, the troops maintain the proper formation spacing but are not required to march in step. They only need to maintain approximately 60 steps per minute in order to keep a normal pace.

The next week the same thing happened, only had gotten used to check the schedule so we knew how late we could sleep and still do everything on time.

And this time everyone bought the paper.

Fisher knew we would do this, so he kept an eye on the people that were shirking, and kicked those out to do some landscaping. I got caught in that one by accident, so I ended up raking leaves.

For two weeks I had not spoken one word in Spanish.

The only Latins in my platoon where second and third generation Chicanos, and their Spanish was horrible. While raking leaves I met a guy from another platoon. He was a big, fat and pink-cheeked kind of guy. You always have a guy like that in your circle of close friends. They are funny as hell and good to have around when some idiot starts a fight.

This guy, I think his name was Lucero, spoke a little bit Spanish but after a while we just stuck to English to avoid pissing off the rednecks (we had a handful). After a while, a guy walks up to us and asks in broken English:

“Where are you from?”

I replied “Puerto Rico.”

If you know any Puerto Rican that was born either in the island or was raised as first or second generation, you

will know there is something very peculiar about our accent. We “roll” the letter “r.”

When I replied “Puerto Rico” it sounded more like “Puerto Rrrrrrico.”

The guy’s eyes opened wide:

“Jesus Christ, of course you are from Puerto Rico. Did you hear how you rolled that “r”?

We burst laughing.

The guy was National Guard, and also in Signal Corps, so after Fort Jackson he was going down to Fort Gordon in Florida for advanced training, the same I was supposed to do. Later he told me that on Sundays there was a special church service in Spanish. The beauty of it is that since it was the only service, the girl recruits went to it too.

That meant we could actually be within a few feet of women of our age and ethnic background, and not a goddamn thing the Army could do about it! This is because back in ’92 we did not have co-ed basic training, so we did not get to see girls until after we graduated from basic training. Only women we ever say were the big fat orcas that worked at the chow hall plus some doctors.

And of course, “Hairy Chest” Foster.

“Hairy Chest” Foster was our company commander. She was a captain, and only God knows what she did to be sent

to run a basic training company (one thing I am sure is her branch was not Infantry, more likely Quartermaster Corps or Ordenance). Foster was a tiny black woman, very athletic and with a voice more manly than 75% of her recruits. Which is why we gave her the nickname. We hated her guts because she complained that our cadences were dirty, so we had to be careful whenever marching close to the company orderly room (out in the field it was fair game, she never went to check on us).

Every Sunday we were introduced to one more thing that we could use to escape the landscaping detail, and the next week it would be yanked from us for some reason or another. Eventually we figured out that all we had to do was to read the paper as slow as possible. As long as the drill sergeant saw you reading the actual paper (not the comics) he would leave you alone. If you made it to lunch without getting grabbed for landscaping, then all bets were off and you could spend the rest of the day shining boots and watching CNN or MTV in the day room downstairs. Later when we solidified out position as the honor platoon of the training cycle (everything you do carries a score, so whatever platoon is ahead is the honor platoon) our drill sergeants let us pitch in and order pizza for everyone except the couple fat kids we could not get rid of.

The End

© 2004, Pedro Vera.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs-NonCommercial License. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd-nc/1.0/ or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.